

# Grandeur, Ghosts & Gargoyles

Government  
Publications

The entertaining history  
of Ontario's Parliament Building

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# Grandeur, Ghosts & Gargoyles

The new Ontario Parliament Building opened with a bang on the afternoon of April 4, 1893. A spring gale snarled around the towers of the squat, pinkish-brown pile, shattering a huge window in the west wing with an appalling crash.

No one was hurt, but there were shrieks of alarm from the fashionable crowd gathered in the park below.

Savage gusts of wind scooped up dust from the unsodded ground and hurled it at the polished black carriages of the gentry and the pale-green and heliotrope gowns of their ladies.

A Canadian Red Ensign, fresh from the flagmakers, had been hoisted on its 75-foot mast at noon. It was in tatters by five o'clock.

The top hats of the dignitaries and the cloth caps of the workers flew through the air and rolled together democratically in the dust.

It was a stimulating beginning: probably the windiest day in the 101-year history of the Legislature.

"Toronto's 400 were all there", according to the *Toronto Empire's* reporter. These were the social leaders of the prim city of 150,000, which was expanding so fast and becoming so daringly modern.

The horse still carried or pulled most people—by cart, cutter, cab or streetcar. But downtown streets now glowed in the light of 800 sputtering electric arc lamps. And an electric streetcar, partially heated by

a coal stove, clanged its way up Church Street from Front to north Sherbourne, every day except Sundays.

The broad sweep of University Avenue, lined by maples and horse chestnuts brought from England, was the biggest street, if not as lively and fashionable as King.

Now it was crowned by a great new building, which the Ontario Parliament, contractors and architects had been arguing about for sixteen years. The fine folk and the small folk flocked up from the city to enjoy the pageantry of the opening and then take a look inside.

Shortly before three o'clock, the Governor General's bodyguard clattered up the driveway, their white-plumed helmets glittering in the fitful sunshine. Behind them, clutching his cocked hat in an open landau, came the gold-braided figure of the Lieutenant-Governor the Hon. George Airey Kirkpatrick, about to open the building and the new session of the Legislature in the name of the Queen.

Gunners of the Toronto Field Battery stood in the park, ready to fire a fifteen-gun salute. But the guard of honour from Company '2', Royal School of Infantry, was nowhere to be seen.

The military were on the brink of panic. Then, with minutes to go, the red coats of the infantry appeared on College St. Urged on by a sweating sergeant-major, they quick-marched through the dust and shuffled into line outside the main portico.



Inside, Sergeant-at-Arms Glackenmeyer hefted the burnished Mace, preparing to shoulder it for the first time into a Chamber worthy of its tradition.

A mace was originally a medieval weapon—a spiked club wielded in battle by clergymen who were forbidden to carry swords.

It became a symbol of the authority of kings and parliaments. The Ontario Mace represents the power of the Speaker, the chairman of the House—a power the early Speakers had exercised in various cramped, dreary settings.

The first Assembly of Upper Canada met in Newark (now Niagara-on-the-Lake) in 1792 after the province was created by splitting the old Province of Quebec into Upper and Lower Canada.

Four years later they moved to York (Toronto) and occupied two humble wooden buildings, grandly named the Palace of Governments. The Americans burned the Palace to the ground when they occupied

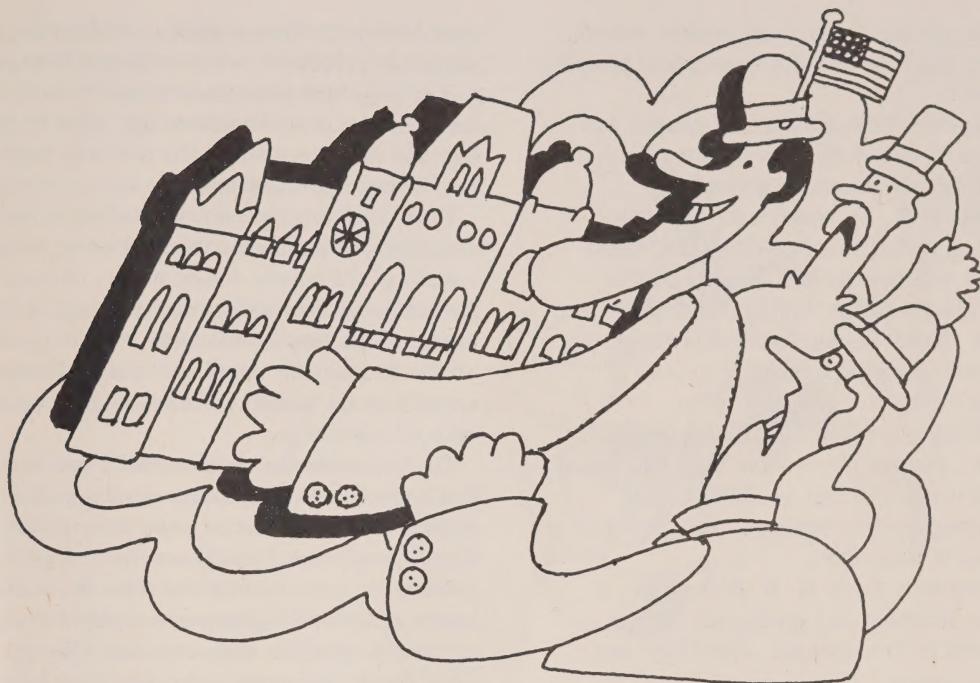
the town during the War of 1812.

The next building was on the site of an old jail at King and Berkeley streets. It was brick, but it burned down without foreign help in 1824. Sessions were held in spare halls until the second parliament building opened on Front Street in 1832.

In 1840, the two Canadas were reunited and their joint legislature began 16 years of wandering, first to Kingston, then Montreal (where rioters set fire to Parliament with the Members inside) then back and forth between Quebec and Toronto.

1867 brought Confederation and the establishment of the present Province of Ontario. Its lawmakers settled for a time on Front St.

By 1877 they were demanding better accommodation, but not until 1880 could they agree to do anything about it. Then they voted \$500,000, a considerable sum, for a new building on the Queen's Park site.



It was then occupied by a lunatic asylum—some said a haunted lunatic asylum. But this did not bother a government that had once lived on a jail site.

King's College, forerunner of the University of Toronto, had bought the park for \$16,000 in 1826 from three of the Anglican "Family Compact" families which then ruled the province. In 1845, the college had been secularized—taken out of the hands of the Church of England—and become the University. Students moved in to the new pseudo-Grecian King's College building in the park.

Five years later the University leased the entire

park to the city of Toronto for 999 years with a provision that a site be reserved for the provincial government.

In 1856 the students moved out, and for the next thirty years patients from the Hospital for the Insane were confined there.

It was torn down in 1886 when construction began on the new parliament. Mr. Edward Greig, who grew up in one of the big houses bordering the park, recalled that "as youngsters we were afraid to go near the place because the ghosts of former inmates were supposed to be still running around."

Ghosts or not, the legislators were pleased with the site. And they wanted the best the world could provide for their \$500,000.

In 1880, an international architectural contest was held. Plans from all over were submitted to a jury of seven Canadian and six American architects.

The chairman was R. A. Waite, a 32-year-old Englishman living in Buffalo, New York. He found fault with all the submissions and declared that he could produce a better design with his hands tied behind his back. Waite was an excellent poker player. He upped the ante, designed a building to cost \$750,000 and got the job.

Canadian architects raged at "the Buffalo individual" and two of them sued the government but construction began. It would eventually cost \$1,300,000 plus \$200,000 for fittings and furnishings—but costs got out of hand even in those days.

Waite followed the style of H. H. Richardson, a popular Chicago architect, and produced a design that was described as Romanesque, with Celtic and Indo-Germanic carvings.

The *Empire* called it "far from beautiful by modern standards, but rather monolithic in its domination of the head of the avenue."

Dominate, it did; and still does, despite soaring skyscrapers to the east, north and south. It is still less than beautiful by the standards of 80 years later, but Waite certainly built to last. Some of his sandstone foundation blocks were as big as small rooms.

The original ones were quarried near the Forks of Credit and trundled in laboriously by cart. Soon the Credit Valley could not furnish enough stone, quickly enough, so Waite turned to 400 acres of brownstone quarries near Orangeville.

He brought squads of miners over from England to bring the stone out. Convicts at the brickworks

operated by the Central Prison, on Strachan Ave. supplied 10,500,000 bricks at \$6 per thousand.

The deep blue slates for the roof came from Rutland, Vermont. Waite was lavish with copper, cast iron and hammered steel. His roof was supported by four layers of wooden beams.

Four monster gargoyles, sly and crafty as cartoonists' caricatures of politicians, sneered down from the corners of the copper-domed towers. Above the round Roman arches were allegorical carvings shouting the virtues of the times—Moderation holding a curbed bridle, Justice with sword and scales, Power with a sword and oak branch, Wisdom with an open book and lamp of knowledge.

On the central facade a mural 70 feet long and 15 feet high showed figures representing music, agriculture, commerce, art, science, law, philosophy, architecture, engineering and literature—all of which would concern the men inside at one time or another. Eight heroes of Ontario history were stamped in stone to the east and west of the main entrance: Governor Simcoe, Chief Justice Robinson, John Sandfield Macdonald, William Hume Blake, Timothy Blair Pardee, Sir Isaac Brock, Robert Baldwin, and Matthew Crooke Cameron.

For the parliamentarians and civil servants of the time, it was an immense building. As the Premier, Sir Oliver Mowat rode up for the opening, he turned to a clerk and said "Well, Joe, we built it. How are we going to fill it with people?"

Sir Oliver was 73, and had been in office for eleven years. He was a brave but forlorn figure that day, eyes pale and moist behind their steel-rimmed glasses. His wife, who should have shared the occasion with him, had died three weeks before.

After the formal opening of the session, the Members presented him with a full-sized portrait of himself and

he made a rambling, nostalgic reply, talking of his own advancing age and remembering the Toronto of old—"Little York" with its unpaved roads and 3,000-odd people, where he had begun practice as a lawyer fifty years before.

Then the Members whiled away the afternoon by considering such urgent matters as the control of drainage in swampy municipalities and the dehorning of cattle.

In the evening the public were admitted in droves. They tramped up the slate treads of the grand staircase, admired its hammered-steel balustrade and entered the Chamber, the jewel of the building and its reason for existence.

The walls gleamed with Canadian sycamore and mahogany panelling, surmounted by wood-carvings—no two alike—and inscriptions such as "May peace be with you" (under the Press gallery) and "Hear the other side" (on the Speaker's side).

The ceiling of the Chamber, nearly fifty feet up, was something of an engineering miracle, suspended from the roof by wood and iron trusses. Beneath it four enormous chandeliers, weighing 900 pounds each, hung from windlasses, which would be cranked down once a year for cleaning.

The people gossiped in the corridors outside, examining the new-fangled electric fittings which vied with yellow gas mantles to shed light. They explored interesting nooks and crannies. Some were still slightly afraid of ghosts, despite the newness of it all.

The basement was a source of joy to the kids, with its six coal-fired boilers, each 16 feet long and its 13 fireproof vaults which ensured, for the first time, the safety of the provincial records.

They rode the electric elevators up and down to the fourth floor until one stuck and the others were shut off for the night.



There was dancing to two military bands in the main hallway. Non-alcoholic refreshments were served.

After the last carriage had left, the plain folk piled aboard the late streetcars and swayed home through the windy night. Some took cabs, which cost 20 cents for a one-horse vehicle and 25 cents for the luxury of a two-horse ride.

After such a grand night, it was worth the extravagance.

Next day, the *Empire* paid reluctant tribute to the new building. "Legislators in Fairyland", ran its main headline. But it would not quite forgive the English architect for being an American resident—"Waite's Yankee hand is seen in the number of cuspids in the corridors," it observed.

In the early days, the ghosts appeared. Frank Yeigh, author and journalist who wrote the only definitive history of the building, kept notes on them in his files, which are now in the Ontario Archives.

An old soldier, in full regimental dress, was said to parade in the office of the Queen's Printer. There were three women inmates of the old asylum—one in white with streaming hair, one wearing a checked dress thrown over her head and one who had hanged herself on a hook in the basement.

All were said to make distressing moans. One night-watchman refused to enter the reporters' room after dark because of the noise.

They have not been heard of since the turn of the century. But there were other problems.

Waite had installed an engine in the basement, linked to an iron grill in the ceiling, galvanised iron pipes and a brick chimney, to pump "foul air" out of the Chamber during debates.

This was to be well used during the sessions ahead. The elegance of the mahogany panelling, the great chandeliers and even the Speaker's dais of woods imported from Santo Domingo, did not daunt the earthier Members. By 1912 there were complaints that the ventilation was inadequate. A later cool-air system suffered because its intake was placed on an outside wall beside the Queen's Park post office, and mail trucks backed up to it, allowing their exhaust gases to be sucked straight into the Chamber.

Also, government tends to expand. Within twenty years the building that Mowat doubted he could fill, was overflowing.

Memos to the Public Works Department complained that clerks and stenographers were getting rheumatism from working on cold concrete floors, covered with thin linoleum and senior officials were catching colds because their office windows wouldn't shut.

A new north wing was built to accommodate the legislative library and other offices. At the same time, the west wing had to be rebuilt because Waite's wooden beams had burned through.

At noon on a September day in 1909, an elevator man rushed along a fourth floor corridor, shouting, "Fire!" Tinsmiths had been repairing the eavestrough when sparks from their charcoal burner set the structure alight.

Civil servants climbed up with hoses and checked the flames before the fire brigade arrived, but much of the roof was gone, the upper floor rooms were badly damaged and the library was burnt out.

During the rebuilding, the contractors took another look at the big round hole in the west wing facade that was obviously designed to take a clock. According to Frank Yeigh, a "massive illuminated clock", ten feet in diameter, was included in the original design. But for reasons now lost in time, Parliament never got its clock. A stone rosette was put in its place.

Perhaps the Province felt a clock would only serve the university across the road by ticking away its 999 year lease.

The Premier of the day was Sir James Pliny Whitney. He added a new note of informality to the office by riding his bicycle to work each day, handing it to the uniformed porter at the door, then striding up the grand staircase.

He became the only Premier to die in office—in September, 1914—and lie in state on the floor of the Chamber.

Five years later the United Farmers of Ontario swept into power resolved (like most new administrations) to cut the cost of government. Their leader, Ernest Charles Drury, cut his own costs at times by sleeping in a brass bed beside his office.

(His enemies pictured him hanging out his washing



on lines across the corridor, but the first "Farmer Premier" was not as folksy as that.)

He had a bulldog jaw and a great wide mouth which he used to denounce the three great evils in the world—protective tariffs, Communism and liquor.

His farmer colleagues agreed with him on the first two but were not so sure about the third. And so the third brought down his government.

In the summer of 1923, reporters heard tales of a wild after-hours party in the Provincial Treasurer's

office involving whisky and women. This was not only scandalous but illegal under Prohibition. When the story was printed, Premier Drury lost his temper and dissolved the House. "I regretted it ever since," he wrote later. "Heads of government should not lose their temper."

He had cause to regret it, for he lost the subsequent election—not because of the high jinks in the treasurer's office, but over a much stranger scandal.

Howard Ferguson, the effervescent Conservative

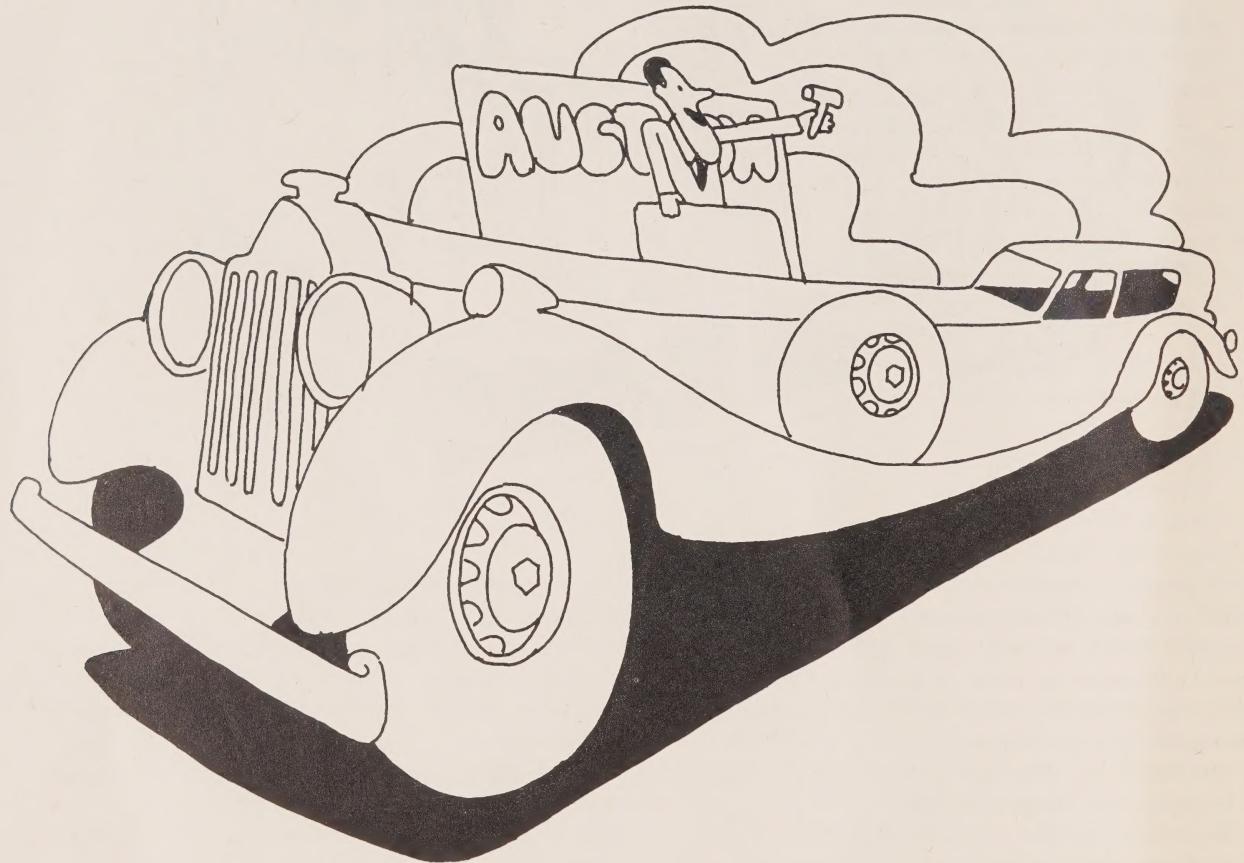
leader, accused the parsimonious farmer of installing in his office fireplace a brass coal scuttle worth \$100.

The frugal country folk were horrified and elected Ferguson's government. The triumphant Tories auctioned off the offending coal-scuttle for \$120.

Drury said it was worth \$20, if that, and later Conservative premiers bore him out. George S. Henry,

who was also to be charged with extravagance, said the scuttle story was a myth. Twenty-five years after, Leslie Frost agreed. He inquired into the whole mystery of the Premier's fireplace accessories and found that Ferguson had removed a brass rail and fire irons and hidden them away in a storeroom.

Frost unearthed them and put them back in the



hearth. By that time the central heating had so improved that only one fireplace—the Lieutenant-Governor's—was still supplied with coal and wood.

Mr. Drury lived to enjoy his vindication and write his own story. He died in 1968, aged 90.

The most explosive personality to occupy the Premier's office roared up to the front steps in a rented Buick in July 1934, and proceeded to shake the building to its sandstone roots.

Liberal M. F. (Mitch) Hepburn was a young (37) round-faced onion farmer from Elgin County, the champion of "the man in the back concession". He was headstrong, dictatorial, humourous and unforgettable.

Apart from his violent feuds and legislative accomplishments, he changed the rather stiff and musty way of life in the building with the statement: "You can have too much dignity in government."

He had just dramatized his disapproval of the alleged extravagance of his predecessor, Conservative Premier George S. Henry, by selling off all the province's 47 official cars at a public auction in Varsity Stadium. Henry's grey Packard limousine fetched \$1,500.

He also fired nearly all the civil servants hired by the Conservatives in the previous nine months, all the Hydro-Electric power commissioners, every game warden in Ontario and 183 bee-keepers (describing them as "a keeper for every bee in the province").

He abolished the Speaker's traditional opening-day tea party—"No teacup juggling here!" and retired to the back rooms where possibly stronger stuff was poured.

"The man in the back concession is applauding what I am doing", he said blithely.

On April Fool's Day, 1942, a bird got into the Chamber and fluttered wildly around the chandeliers



until a squad of Public Works officials managed to chase it out.

Liberals took this to be a bad omen. Mitch Hepburn resigned that session and went back to Elgin "to listen to the grass grow." His memory lingers as a reminder of exciting times.

The mystery of Queen's Park's missing corner-stone still baffles its historians. It was customary to bury relics of the day in an iron box beneath the building—newspapers, pictures and messages from those who were entitled to be immortalized.

But there is no record of any stone-laying ceremony. Archivists have poked around the sandstone, looking in vain for an inscribed block. Some say the secret is under the roof, behind a gargoyle, but there's no evidence to support this, either.

Still, no one will say Queen's Park is a sphinx without a secret. Generations of politicians have accused previous generations of covering things up. Despite this, perhaps because of it, the facts come out.

Recently, the mellow grime of the years has been sandblasted away and the building restored to its original newborn pink.

But after dark, when the "red star" light in an upper round window signals a night session, it glows in its dark green oasis with the majesty of its eighty years.

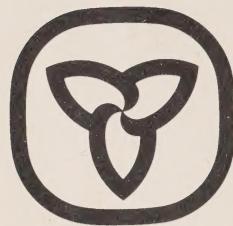
As the *Empire* said, it is not the most beautiful of buildings. It is not even the strongest. Yet R. A. Waite's combination of stone, wood and cast iron matches the power and pliability, rigidity and amicable compromise that make up the form of government the people of Ontario find best suited to their needs.

Like the building, this has endured.



## Notes





Ontario

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